

# Displaying the 'professional self': The impact of social workers' performance and practice on kinship carers' own children.

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## Abstract

Limited research has been conducted in relation to social work and the impact upon kinship carers' own children in a UK context. This paper argues pressure from government policy imperatives and organisational priorities creates tension and conflict in the professional self in the context of kinship care and with kinship carers' own children. Stronach and colleagues' (2002) concepts 'economy of performance' and 'ecology of practice' provides a conceptual lens to examine the 'professional self' through social work narratives. This paper focuses upon data from four focus groups and 16 semi-structured interviews carried out with 29 social workers within one local authority in the north of England. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Ritchie & Spencer 1994; Srivastava & Thompson 2009). Only data related to the professional self are examined. The discussion explores how social workers' attempted to navigate the tension in their everyday practice. It illuminates the impact upon their performance in kinship care and implications for practice with carers' own children. The conclusion reveals the need for social workers to create a space within which kinship carers' own children's voices are heard.

## Key words

Kinship care, family social work, foster care (family), fostering.

## Introduction

This paper argues that pressures from government policy imperatives and organisational priorities in relation to use of kinship care creates tension and conflict in the professional self, which, in turn, has implications for practice with kinship carers' own children. The aim of this paper is to examine how social workers have responded to these structural constraints, and consider how such actions shape their practice. To date, there has been limited focus upon the sons and daughters of kinship carers, they still remain largely silent and invisible in social work discourses (Hunt *et al.* 2008; Farmer & Moyers 2008). This paper, drawing upon Stronach and colleagues' (2002) conceptual lens, seeks to redress this imbalance. Stronach *et al.* (2002) utilise the two concepts 'economy of performance' and 'ecology of practice' to examine the tensions within the 'professional self'. Although their work was written in relation to the professional identities of teachers and nurses their concepts can be deployed as a means of exploring social workers' performance and practice in the context of kinship care with kinship carers' own children.

## 'Economy of Performance' and 'Ecology of Practice'

According to Stronach *et al.* (2002:132) an 'economy of performance' relates to the expression of workplace performance in terms of 'quality, effectiveness and outcomes', factors which can be 'normatively assessed and made public'. The drive of reform New Labour pushed forward through its modernisation programme (DoH 1998a) epitomised that government's focus upon the use of performance indicators and targets in social work, so that on the one hand, initiatives such as *Quality Protects* (DoH 1998b) and *Choice Protects* (DoH 2002), emphasised the need for a procedurally driven and measurable system, whilst on the other hand, the national objectives and performance led sub-objectives within these initiatives sought to create systems based primarily on promoting good outcomes for children. For example, many policy objectives within the *Choice Protects* (DoH 2002) initiative supported the placement of children with family and friends as prioritised by the Children Act 1989 (CA 1989) (Hunt 2003).

The past decade, or so, has witnessed an increased use of Residence Orders (now Child Arrangement Orders) and Special Guardianship Orders (DfE 2014) indicating an adherence to the pro-family rhetoric of the CA 1989 and government policy aspirations emphasising placement stability, choice and the drive to reduce the looked after children figures (DoH 1998b; DoH 2002; Hunt 2003). However, this sits alongside much current debate regarding how effective the pre-occupation with performance-led practice in this area has been, when considering the lack of resources and quality of support these placements receive (Hunt & Waterhouse 2012; 2013). This, I would argue, illustrates a disconnection between the original intention and subsequent outcome of policy objectives in relation to kinship care placements.

Stronach and colleagues' (2002) 'ecologies of practice' refers to a professional's 'craft knowledge' and 'affective experience'. The former, 'craft knowledge' relates to the professional's discipline specific knowledge and skills, the theory and practice of social work. In other words, what Trevithick (2008:1214) refers to as '*knowing about and knowing how*'. This, in turn, includes the codes of practice and values which underpin, and are central to, the professional's identity (Leece & Leece 2011). Social work is also viewed, by many authors, as consisting of the complementary interaction of explicit, tacit or intuitive knowledge, also referred to as practice wisdom, accumulated through learning, as well as personal and professional experience (Munro 2002; Stronach *et al.* 2002; Trevithick 2008). As such, a fundamental element of craft knowledge is affective experience. By affective experience Stronach *et al.* (2002) are alluding to the affective states and attitudes conveyed in applying the craft ideologies held by professionals.

Crucially, Stronach and colleagues' (2002) two concepts cannot be viewed as mutually exclusive. The broader social contexts in which social workers work and their practice experiences and beliefs interact in complex ways and can, at times, be in tension with each other. For instance, as previously indicated, there is little knowledge within a UK context that explores the lived experiences of the sons and daughters of kinship carers. Time and again, developments in policy and practice guidance have failed to make visible these children within a complex series of social

work processes (DfE 2011a; DfE 2011b) or even view them as distinct from mainstream foster carers' own children. Yet, both government and agency policy and social work practice can have implications for these children. Social workers, in the context of kinship care may draw upon their craft knowledge and adopt a craft ideology which embodies a belief in child-centred practice. However, their professional experience and awareness of structural constraints will also affect whether they express a sense of commitment, ambivalence or perhaps scepticism about the effectiveness of, adopting, this approach in their practice with kinship carers' own children (Stronach *et al.* 2002; Trevithick 2008; Fook 2012). It is this paper's contention that structural constraints create tension and conflict in the professional self which inevitably impact upon the quality of social work interaction with kinship carers' own children.

## Research context

This study took place in a local authority located in the north of England. In seeking to provide equitable service provision to family and friend foster carers this local authority had developed a kinship care team. The team consisted of six kinship social workers, and a team manager, who worked exclusively with a range of formal and informal family and friend arrangements. They provided an authority wide service to all family and friend carers, and support and advice to social workers; in addition they supported their approved family and friend carers who resided out of county.

The following section summarises the methodology and data analysis utilised to examine social workers' narratives from a doctoral study exploring kinship carers' own children's experiences of kinship care arrangements. Kinship carers' own children, still residing at home, were the primary focus of the study; birth parents of children in kinship care arrangements were not considered. The study involved two data sets. The first, kinship care families, has been explored elsewhere (Author 2013). This particular paper focuses upon the second of two data sets; qualitative data from focus groups and individual interviews with social workers.

## Method

This paper draws upon a study in which a qualitative approach was adopted. Purposive sampling was used with social workers recruited from one local authority in the North of England. The data emerging from four focus groups and 16 semi-structured interviews with a total of 29 social workers is focussed upon. Social workers occupied various roles within the local authority; kinship social workers (5), respite fostering social workers (4), child care social workers (7), senior social workers (4) and team managers (9). A key strength of focus groups in this study centred upon participants' ability to contextualise and co-construct narratives through group discussion (Morgan 1998). In-depth semi-structured interviews provided further depth to the issues emerging and an emic perspective (Pike 1967 cited in Berry 1989). Ethics approval was gained through the University Research Ethics Committee and the local authority. Participants gave written consent to record and transcribe data, all participants have been anonymised.

## Data Analysis

The research design drew upon a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin 1998). The processes of gathering and analysing data involved interaction between data and the research questions to ensure ideas were generated from the data itself and were not imposed. Data gathering ceased when theoretical saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Transcribing and reading through the transcripts assisted with identifying patterns and manual coding. All transcribed data were imported into NVivo 7 and coding revisited. The analytic process involved Ritchie & Spencer's (1994) five steps; 'data familiarisation; identifying a thematic framework; indexing and charting; and mapping and interpretation' (Ritchie & Spencer 1994; Srivastava & Thompson 2009:754). This enabled effective management of data and the ability to identify new meanings, key themes and issues framed within a social constructionist and interpretive approach. Thematic analysis revealed three superordinate themes and 14 sub-themes. The findings section below, drawing upon Stronach *et al.* (2002), examines three discernible sub-themes as they relate to the professional self; 'kinship care in a performance driven culture'; 'tensions and contradictions in child-centred practice' and; 'the role of context in informing professionals' practice'.

## Limitations

The data drawn upon emerge from a small sample of social workers occupying hierarchical positions and roles. It is acknowledged that the research and findings are limited in scope due to the sample size and geographical context. Moreover, recruiting social workers from across the local authority aimed to capture any socio-demographic and cultural diversity within social workers' caseloads, this did not emerge. Furthermore, the research took place in a particular geographical location, a single local authority, at a specific point in time. The findings and conclusions presented in this paper must be viewed in light of these limitations.

## Findings

### *Kinship care in a performance driven culture*

The data revealed the multiple ways in which government and organisational factors shaped and constrained practice in the area of kinship care. For example, managers' narratives illustrate the conflict arising from external drivers impacting upon the organisation and, in turn, their performance as the following managers stated; '*LAC figures down (SWM3)*' and '*more stars ... government' audits ... more money with that, don't you? (SWM2)*'. These extracts clearly articulate the political and ideological context informing their professional practice in the form of audits, targets and stars. In doing so, their narratives reveal their public accountability. Indeed, this emerged from their discussion in terms of scrutiny and regulated performance in the form of monitoring, measuring and inspection, resulting in sanctions or rewards. However, managers' views also illuminate their affective experiences; '*It kind of goes with the philosophy doesn't it of kind of placing with family, not removing, I think financially... (SWM4)*' and '*But we don't want children in really do we, in foster care really if we can, if there are suitable alternatives within the family (SWM3)*'. Thus

emphasising how the regulation and control of social work practice sits somewhat uncomfortably alongside the competing interests, professional awareness of promoting good outcomes for children and professionals' commitment to the underlying philosophy of placing with family.

The data revealed pertinent insights into how organisational constraints, fiscal concerns and limited resources, could impact upon the use of kinship care as the following senior social worker stated; *'Money, that we are not using up resources i.e., foster carers, because we don't have a lot of foster carers (SWS)'*. In addition, the following manager explains how, within this study, placement with family had become the defining organisational narrative and the pressure to place immense, particularly in terms of accountability;

*'...but the kind of resource side of things, then the management and the pressure that we all feel...you're going to have to come up with a damn good reason why you can't place if there's a possibility of a family placement' (SWM3(FG)).*

Dwindling resources clearly had implications for role performance both at the managerial level and social worker's direct practice. For instance, the placement of children with family is constructed and framed in a number of salient and powerful ways below. First, in terms of the pressure to perform, place children, in a climate of austerity and limited placement options. Second, and importantly, as part of managerial responsibilities, this could restrict their professional autonomy. Third, and quite tellingly, articulated as part of their personal and professional value base.

*'...obviously as a manager...my first answer is about the fact that we are very short on local authority foster carers and it is another resource that we can access. But my personal values and my social work values are...that we are promoting our duty really that we're keeping children with families...remaining with the family and it's not as extreme for the child' (SWM8).*

*'...when they are assessing or you're making decisions to meet the department's targets, they would much rather a child be placed within the family rather than having to look for an alternative placement. So while they may listen to what the [kinship carer's] child's views are...I don't think they necessarily stand for too much' (SWS4).*

Crucially, for these social workers, the above observations reveal that, where an appropriate family placement was identified there was potential for host children's views and experiences to be negated. This generated tension as they strove to address the competing pressures of child-centred practice, in relation to kinship carers' own children, versus structural constraints and pressures to place children.

Social workers operate in a context of competing organisational expectations and demands. However, despite operating within such constraints evidence emerged surrounding social workers balancing their practice with procedural

requirements. Herein social worker's craft knowledge and expertise was drawn upon, alongside the local authority philosophy around family as a resource, to illustrate they are not merely acting as agents of the state;

*'...it's [kinship care] a good resource if it's going to keep children within their families (SWS3)'.*

*'...we're keeping that child with the family, you know research shows that family is best for the children (SWS1)'.*

These messages were reinforced in the following focus group discussion between kinship social workers;

*KSW2(FG): 'you know universally, they're going to be within their kinship...and that's obviously what...we're all striving towards you know. Retaining links, it's good for their identity...'*

*KSW1(FG): It's that sense of belonging isn't it.*

*KSW2(FG): Belonging, Yeah. I think there's lots of stuff that I've read about how...foster children feel that when they're placed in stranger care they might be happy they might be good placements, but they talk about something missing you know.... And I think that's about...belonging'.*

Practitioners' narratives were constructed around a discourse in which they were acutely aware of the impact of internal and external drivers and constraints. However, a powerful theme threaded throughout focuses upon the philosophy of placement with family set within a discourse of family preservation and permanency which seeks to create a sense of identity, belonging and emotional continuity for placed children (Author 2013). According to KSW2 above, factors which may well be missing from placement with strangers irrespective of how good the placement may be.

Practitioners' views illuminate how their performance in this area of practice, framed within the legal duty to place, is, at times, driven by external factors such as fiscal constraints and an audit culture. These comments reflect the problematic nature of this work, which I would argue, in turn, results in over-riding the concerns expressed by kinship carers' own children. This is explored further below.

### *Tensions and contradictions in child-centred practice*

Respondents' narratives revealed the discourse of participation, as well as the legislative framework, in which they performed their role in relation to kinship carers' own children. In doing so it also illuminated three key positions which reveal the tension between the rhetoric and reality of consulting, involving, listening and responding to the views of carers' own children in placement decisions. It also highlights how they strive to make sense of their role and performance as a professional operating within the context of child-centred practice. I argue that this

creates a tension in terms of professional duties and responsibilities and their value base.

The first key position was defined by social workers who were of the view that kinship carers' own children should participate in decisions as to whether a child is placed;

*'...well I think you would involve them in everything that...was going on, depending on their age, you know, and their understanding. They would have to be involved in all parts of the, not in all parts of the assessment, but they would need to feel part of it. And also feel that their wishes are being...listened to' (SWCC1).*

*'...the children already in the household should have...at the fairly initial stage, some input on whether or not they think this is a good idea, or whether it's going to work. And that sounds fairly hard for the child to be placed, but I do think to make it work they've got to be on board a bit...well they've got to be on board a lot' (SWS2).*

These narratives clearly illustrate the ways in which social workers construct their understanding of seeking carers' own children's views. Although they articulate the need for inclusion of host children's views in the decision-making process, in whole or in part, their standpoint is quite revealing. It highlights the emphasis upon the placed child, in terms of the stability and success of the placement, it reveals age based assumptions regarding level and type of involvement and this is framed in the context of formal processes – the assessment. As interviews progressed and the reality of practice was considered, the disparity between what social workers said, regarding kinship carers' own children's involvement, and their actions became increasingly apparent.

The second stance taken, as indicated by the following manager, considered taking account of the needs of both children;

*'I think the essential bit is at the beginning. It's about planning, whether it's local authority foster care or whether it's a family or friend placement, it's about having a true understanding about that child's needs and about the adjustments that need to be made.... But then it's about the process of that and communicating throughout and understanding for both children, that it is an adjustment, and it's about allowing them to talk that through' (SWM8).*

This position ascribes importance to listening and communication with both children. This view is set within the practice context of on-going assessments, with a clear sense of the significance of planning overtime as a continuous process, as opposed to a single episode, within their practice (Pinkney 2011). It contrasts with the earlier narrative, however, in terms of both children's involvement being perceived as significant. The rhetoric of this position, which I would attribute to social workers' strong value perspective in terms of advocating for the children and young people

with whom they work, was conveyed by those with experience in kinship care, as well as those justifying their standpoint, and was clearly a position they strove to attain within their practice. Although not an unusual position held by social workers it was, however, not one that could easily be accomplished in practice.

The third position, and indeed the most predominant to emerge, from child care social workers and managers, focused upon the need to prioritise the safety of the child who required a placement;

*'In respect of if the issue comes up then we'll put the support in at that point or you recognise it [child's voice] at that point, because at that point you're not in a crisis situation really, that the child you're responsible for is safe, and then you...look at the impact on the other children.... So, but I think it's an afterthought' (SWM2(FG)).*

In the example above kinship carers' own children being constructed as an 'afterthought' presents a powerful image. Fulfilling their legislative duty to place children created a barrier to seeking and responding to the views of kinship carers' own children;

*'I think as well, you can do the immediate consultation, but sometimes it's kind of loaded because you're consulting, but you still know...even if...the birth child in the family says, "actually my cousin drives me nuts", you know you're probably still going to place, because it's the best thing for that child [placed child], and that child is your priority at that point' (SWM4(FG)).*

Indeed, the findings in this study reveal that, at times, the degree to which kinship carers' own children are listened to, despite actually consulting and gaining the child's view, indicates the disparity between what social workers are expected to do and how they actually respond when faced with the reality of practice.

It might be argued that the inclusion of kinship carers' own children may be seen to be high on rhetoric and low on practical application. I suggest, however, that this narrative highlights the complexity, anxiety and ambivalence experienced by social workers. The urgency in decision-making in kinship care often impacted upon effective placement planning as highlighted by the following child care social worker who stated *'It's much more thrust upon them, I think, with those of family and friends'* (SWCC2). Indeed, the idea that kinship care placements are *'thrust upon'* kinship carers' own children was a recurrent feature of social workers' narratives and was perceived as a factor which essentially precluded the involvement of, and consultation with, kinship carers' own children. This was particularly evident when the placement was made before kinship social workers became involved. This is explored further below.

### *The role of context in informing professionals' practice*

It was overwhelmingly evident within my research that there was a divergence in roles. For example, child care social workers clearly maintained the focus upon



securing and prioritising the welfare of the child being placed. What emerged strongly from social workers' narratives was that the placed child was at the centre of adult's decision-making in kinship care arrangements, particularly in crisis situations;

SWCC(FG): *'Our main objective is to get the child placed, so we wouldn't always look at how it was going to affect other family members.'*

SWS(FG): *'Yeah but...it's different when it's done through the court, because you have to do a proper, thorough assessment where you will meet all the family members, you get their views and you go through a proper assessment.'*

The yardstick for measuring whether kinship carers' own children's views were sought, in this case at least, ultimately came down to whether the case was in proceedings and family or friends required a formal assessment. Essentially, any focus on seeking kinship carers' own children's views is subject to the status of the placed child, as this determines whether a fostering assessment is carried out. Consequently, the focus upon the placed child, in turn, results in the marginalisation of other children involved, as illustrated by the narrative above, unless a *'thorough assessment'* is undertaken as per fostering requirements. This has implications for kinship carers' own children when informal kinship care arrangements are used in crisis situations. Fulfilling statutory requirements in relation to the placed child resulted in silencing kinship carers' own children due to the pressures social workers were under. Social workers appeared to have created a boundary around their role and function that had implications for kinship carers' own children.

The position of the social worker within the organisation had implications for how social workers constructed and performed their role and responsibilities in relation to participatory practice. In the context of kinship care, this impacted upon kinship carers' own children. Crucially, it was apparent in my interviews with frontline social workers that not seeking kinship carers' own children's views was not unusual; neither was asking kinship carers about their own children. For example, child and family social workers I spoke with considered responsibility for consulting with kinship carers' own children to be located in the realms of the fostering services, it was not seen as part of their duties;

*'I worked with a lady from fostering who went to see this twelve year old quite a few times and actually took her out...they did get her views and she said she was happy for this little girl to move in, well, both of them [cousins] at the time, because she was asked about her feelings for both of them [cousins]'* (SWCC4).

*'I don't think we sit down and particularly ask, you know, in the way that you would with a child who was placed'* (SWCC3).

Social workers in different contexts were clear about the roles they occupied in relation to the children with whom they worked. This is particularly interesting bearing in mind the diversity of kinship arrangements they may work with, not all of whom fit

the fostering services remit. The lack of initial consultation with kinship carers' own children was also reflected in relation to on-going consultation about the placement. For example, one (placed) child's social worker responded; '*No, no, not really, not really*' (PCSWFA) when asked about on-going consultation with host children and kinship carers. Indeed, a similar position was held by other (placed) children's social workers regarding seeking the views of host children since the commencement of the placement;

*'...not really with regards to their feelings. The information I've got is more from [parent]' (PCSWFE)*

*I've only seen them [kinship carers' own children] kind of like, popping in and out of the house on a visit that I did with [placed child]...they view her as their sister, from what [kinship carer] has said' (PCSWFC).*

This, to a degree, can be explained in terms of role differences between social workers, that is, whether they have case responsibility for the placed child or case responsibility for the kinship carer. It also raises questions regarding the competing demands and priorities faced by frontline workers who, in the context of this study, aligned their professional role squarely with the placed child. This had profound implications for hearing other children's voices.

In comparison, a critical point of difference was the strong emphasis placed by those professionals working in the fostering services and, more specifically, kinship social workers on consulting with the sons and daughters of kinship carers. They also addressed any issues as they arose by undertaking individual pieces of work with those children;

*KSW5(FG): 'Going back to birth children though...one of the birth children filled in one of the blue forms...they rated it quite low...they weren't happy about the placement...I think [KSW] went out and spent some time with him.*

*KSW3(FG): Yeah...individual pieces of work.*

*KSW5(FG): So I think if we got it back that they were quite worrying on the review form, that we'd do something about it then anyway, wouldn't we?'*

It was interesting to note that in addition to reviews, kinship social workers also used other formal routes to hear the voice of host children. For example, supervision sessions with family and friend foster carers. This reveals how particular social workers become active autonomous agents who creatively, and successfully, navigate and negotiate established procedures to practice effectively for the benefit of their service users, in this case kinship carers' own children. However, as stated earlier, certain processes are linked to the status of the placed child and this was apparent in relation to supervision. This clearly has implications for host children whose parents care for relatives or family friends who are not 'looked after' children. These sons and daughters lack access to such spaces; their voices, should they want them to be heard, would therefore be silenced, or dependent upon the role and

function of the social workers involved. I suggest that, in relation to kinship care placements, the professional context of the child care social worker, including fulfilling statutory requirements, results in giving the placed child priority and this determines practice with kinship carers' own children.

## Discussion

Utilising Stronach *et al.* (2002) to examine how social workers construct their narratives in relation to kinship care illustrates how they display the professional self. In doing so, the tensions experienced and the often complex interplay between 'policy, ideology and practice' surrounding kinship care at the operational level were illuminated (Stronach *et al.* 2002:109). The research identified the pro-family narrative, shaped and framed by a legislative and policy context, seeking permanency for children (Author 2013). One way of achieving this was by promoting the upbringing of children by their families and social network. However, as the data reveal the demands for greater accountability expressed through auditing, targets and performance indicators, has, in turn, placed increased pressure on direct practice and presents particular challenges in this area of work. Whilst it would be easy to state there is an excessive emphasis upon meeting targets and indicators linked to sanctions and rewards, what Stronach *et al.* (2002) refer to as 'economies of performance', in the use of kinship care, this is too simplistic an explanation. This position also leaves little room for considering how professionals operate in terms of their knowledge and expertise – or 'ecologies of practice' in the broader context of their work.

On the one hand, it is possible to see how social workers, particularly managers, consider themselves as implementers of such legislation within their organisational situation. Indeed, their narratives illuminated the embedding of the family-first policy within the organisational culture. On the other hand, as illustrated, social work narratives also highlight the range of factors drawn upon when making professional judgements about placements such as research, theory, practice experience and personal and professional value base. In effect, social workers thus display the complexity of their 'craft knowledge', 'affective experience' (Stronach *et al.* 2002:132) and professional expertise as they strive to achieve child focused elements of practice, reflected in terms of better outcomes for placed children. This argument was increasingly evident when kinship care was compared with stranger foster care, by kinship social workers, wherein the latter was measured against the former and found wanting.

The complexity of balancing such factors in relation to kinship care permeated social workers' narratives across the hierarchical spectrum. Lansdown (2005:119) asserts that local authorities have made placement decisions 'based on cost rather than best interests'. However, this has to be seen in the context of continuing concerns surrounding the economic barriers and bureaucracy within social work, particularly around such factors as procedurally led practice (Turney *et al.* 2011; Munro 2010a) and the legislative and policy context, for example, in terms of the *Quality Protects* and *Choice Protects* agendas. Whilst designed to increase accountability and placement options for children, such central government imposed initiatives appear to inadvertently have mandated a placement performance culture

driven by rewards and a fear of sanctions. This is, at times, at odds with the social workers 'ecology of practice' which recognises not only the benefits of kinship care to placed children but the need to consider the host children.

This research sheds light on social workers' responses to the best interests of the placed child. This is particularly evident in relation to placed children's right to care and protection (Fortin 2009). Social workers are confronted with a dilemma in that where they recognise kinship carers' own children's right to participate in decisions which impact upon their lives, they are also aware that doing so may result in a conflict of interest wherein the best interests of the child in need of a placement will prevail. Social workers, at times, experienced tension between their 'professional self', in terms of recognising the participatory element of their practice and the need to gain children's views versus the need to fulfil not only the legislative and pro-family requirements, but also those of the organisational context and culture within which they operate (Stronach *et al.* 2002; Author 2013). When put into practice this element, at times, resulted in social workers experiencing a state of flux in their decision-making (Stronach *et al.* 2002). This was evident in terms of consulting but knowing that it will be ignored or side-lined if a safe placement can be secured. Consultation with host children is constructed as posing a challenge to the ability to fulfil the best interests of the placed child and as such runs counter to the protectionist child welfare policy and practice framework in which social workers operate. Indeed, respondents' narratives illuminated the tensions and contradictions in the performance of participatory practice as they attempt to negotiate and balance the interests of placed children with those of kinship carers' own children.

This paper proposes a commonality shared by the three positions highlighted in relation to child-centred practice; the emotional aspects of participation in child welfare (Pinkney 2011). The construction of social workers' narratives clearly indicate the different positions children may occupy and the centrality of emotion felt by social workers at different stages not only in terms of participation but also in relation to the decision-making processes. Evidenced by social workers consulting but not following through which, I would argue reflects the emotionally charged situation in which social workers practice; a rapid response is required, following which almost a sigh of relief is expressed at the securing of a safe placement and a reduction in anxiety. This paper suggests this elucidates the child welfare discourse and adult authority underlying this, and other social work narratives, wherein we see children's agency undermined and an infringement of host children's right to have a voice determined by social workers acting in the best interests of the placed child and seeking to protect them.

It could be argued that, in the context of kinship care we see social workers 'privileging protection and provision at the expense of participation' (James 2010:486), a position exacerbated by lack of placements, the need for a swift response and consideration of the outcome for placed children. However, this position also highlights the complex nature of social work and contradictory views simultaneously held by social workers as they seek to balance the competing needs and rights of children. Hence, the reality of practice can, at times, inhibit those social workers who may, given time and opportunity, consult with and include kinship carers' own children, thus preventing them from having a say in matters that can

significantly impact upon their lives. This echoes Munro (2010b:1138) who asserts that 'when there are constraints of time and resources in the system, workers have to make pragmatic decisions about what to prioritise'. In this study this argument could go some way towards explaining social workers' participatory practice, or lack of, in relation to kinship carers' own children. Perversely, it would appear that there is, at times, a tension for social workers in managing their direct work with children and families when the organisation in which they operate is constrained by measureable criteria and regulations, and their performance can have far reaching consequences. This I would argue is reflected in the tension between, and complex nature of, economies of performance and ecologies of practice (Stronach *et al.* 2002).

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989 Article 16 and the Human Rights Act 1998 Article 8, there is a right to family life. This pertains to both kinship carers' and their own children as well as those requiring a placement. However, in the context of this research, I argue the emphasis placed upon what Munro (2011:6) describes as 'the undue importance given to performance indicators and targets' was also influential in driving placement decisions in favour of placed children. Moreover, despite the participatory rights and interests of children embedded in the UNCRC and its relevance to all children, the data suggest two main points. First, the rhetoric of participation is embedded in social worker narratives. However, as illustrated by the findings, it is a contested concept with implications for practice when applied to kinship carers' own children who might be viewed as an '*afterthought*'. Second, and despite the rhetoric of participation, when the rights, needs and welfare of placed children are set against those of kinship carers' own children, irrespective of the impact on the host children's wellbeing, the former will always take precedence over the latter. The dilemmas and contradictions raised in performing participatory practice are defended on the grounds of safeguarding.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has critically examined, through social workers' narratives, the priority afforded to 'economies of performance' at the expense of 'ecologies of practice' in relation to kinship carers' own children. As illustrated, the discursive construction of policy initiatives, targets and indicators, as interpreted within the organisational context, had a profound impact upon social workers' use of kinship care arrangements and upon kinship carers' own children. These findings, in relation to a performance driven audit culture, concur with findings from Munro (2011) and have implications for the way in which hard pressed social workers interact with families and, in turn, the children within those families. Essentially, safeguarding and promoting good outcomes for placed children were the over-riding factors that influenced social workers' practice. Stronach and colleagues' (2002) conceptual lens provides a means of interpreting a social workers' approach to their practice and illuminates the lack of emphasis upon 'ecologies of practice' particularly when their performance is viewed from the position of kinship carers' own children. The data highlight that social workers need to identify ways of keeping host children in focus, irrespective of placement type, to ensure their views are heard. As this paper shows, this was not something that always took place and when it did it tended, on the

whole, to be determined by factors related to the placed child and often subject to the role of the social workers involved. This presents social workers with a considerable challenge if they are to integrate kinship carers' own children's views across the various social work processes in order to ensure good practice and avoid kinship carers' own children's voices being muted and ignored.

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